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Bethesda Green: A Local Model of Sustainable Living

By

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Introduction

I spent three months working for Bethesda Green, a non-profit organization that aims to blend business, government and community interests together through programs and services that promote a healthy economy and sustainable living practices in order to reduce our collective impact on the environment. The three folds that the organization operates under are incubate, educate, and initiate. The incubate "fold" is occupied by the Green Business Incubator Companies, which are start-up, environmentally friendly businesses who are supplied office space and other supports through Bethesda Green. I did not spend much of my time working with the incubator companies; however a fellow intern and myself were able to be the actors in "Savenia Labs," one of the start-up company's commercials.

A majority of my time was spent working under the educate and initiate "folds." Through the educate fold, which encompasses the education center, community outreach and general education, I planned and implemented Solar Bethesda, a solar energy expo. I also created green children's activities that Bethesda Green now uses in their educational center as well as taking them to farmers markets, street fairs, and eventually classrooms. In addition, I updated the educational center with the most current environmental information.

Under the initiate fold, I wrote an official board manual so that there was written conformation of the obligations and privileges of both the board and the executive director. This manual made planning events and general office activities simpler and less daunting.

It is a fairly small organization with only six full-time staff members, however the incubator companies as well as the many part time staff and volunteers ensured that the office was always full of activity. On any given day there would be people testing new products, groups organizing community events, people reaching out to other organizations, educational seminars

and much more. Bethesda Green's small size does not mean they have not had a large impact on our community. Their educational programs and community-based initiatives such as supplying public recycling bins throughout downtown Bethesda have reached thousands of people. If you were to include the volunteers, Bethesda Green would be a huge organization, as volunteers complete most of the work apart from organizational aspects. The best description I have heard of Bethesda Green came from Development Officer, Betsy Reinstein Dewey, who stated, "People who value and are very concerned about environmental issues need to support each other and stick together. Bethesda Green is the venue for that collaboration" ¹

Duties preformed

While working for Bethesda Green, not only did I do normal internship office activities such as making copies and answering phones, I was also able to attend board meetings, sit in on and contribute to planning meetings and act as a liaison between Bethesda Green's sponsors and Bethesda Green. I also attended meetings with event planners, organized other volunteers and acted as a Bethesda Green representative at community events such as the unveiling of a solar powered car charging station and a community cultural fair. I was also responsible for working with Honest Tea, one of Bethesda Greens biggest donors, to not only organize shipments of tea to the office but also increase their involvement in the community, as they are an environmentally friendly company. This duty included interacting with the "TeaEO" of Honest Tea, Seth Goldman. One of the benefits of the organization being so small is that as an intern, I was given a lot of responsibility and allowed to contribute to the organization's activities far more than if I was interning at a large corporation.

¹ Bethesda Green End of Year Report bethesdagreen.org

Special Projects

Solar Bethesda

Solar Bethesda is a free, one-day event where community members can have their questions about all things solar answered by solar experts. There were opportunities to learn about solar installation costs, benefits, rebates and tax credits, hear from neighbors about their experience with solar power or solar hot water, check ones' homes' solar readiness using satellite mapping, and meet with local solar contractors. In total over 250 people attended this year's event, which I helped to orchestrate. This, the second annual Solar Bethesda, had not only solar vendors but also lectures going on throughout the day with information on solar energy. On the day of the event, I was responsible for organizing and helping the vendors set up, making sure the lecture hall was prepared for the various presenters, organizing the volunteers into their assorted jobs and making sure the day flowed smoothly. Prior to the day of the event, I was involved in multiple planning activities.

My first role in planning Solar Bethesda was to line up vendors, sponsors and speaker. I did this along with Bethesda Green Executive Director Dave Feldman. Mr. Feldman approached previous donors and vendors as well as new prospective vendors to see if they wanted to participate in Solar Bethesda. It was then my job to work with the individual companies to arrange payments, negotiate sponsorship levels and arrange where they would be situated on the day of the event. In doing this I created multiple documents outlining vendor and donor responsibility as well as Bethesda Greens responsibility based on donor level (attached.)

I was also responsible for publicizing the event. This included everything from creating and distributing flyers (attached) to going to farmers markets to talk to people one-on-one to hanging banners at the Bethesda Green office to updating the Bethesda Green website

(www.bethesdagreen.org) and facebook page. I was also required to write a press release (attached), which got our event publicized in two local newspapers. In addition I was responsible for organizing volunteers to hang flyers around the community. This was one of the most time consuming and essential parts of this event as it took immense amounts of time to reach the large audience we were hoping to attract, and the vendors were expecting substantial potential clientele to talk to.

Another preparation I was responsible for was developing printed materials and signage. This included making nametags for staff, volunteers, and vendors, creating and printing a program for the event (attached) and creating signs to designate each vendor's area and recognize the sponsors.

In the end, the lectures were well attended, and vendors were able to make contacts that have led to sales. One Solar Bethesda vendor stated, "The Solar Bethesda expo attracted a nice crowd with good inquires. All in all, a positive experience and worth the investment of time and effort." I ended up learning a lot about solar energy and even got a solar estimate done on my home. Overall, the event was successful.

Board Manual

Under Direct guidance of the Chairman of the Board Ilaya Hopkins and Bethesda Green's Executive Director Mr. Feldman, I was instructed to create a board manual for Bethesda Green. Prior to my involvement, Bethesda Green had many documents and bylaws regulating the relationship between board and staff, but they were never compiled into one easy to understand and manage format. It was my duty to compile all these documents into a manageable system that was easily comprehensible, making the relationship less tense, but also a tool that board members could use to gain information on Bethesda Green to present to potential volunteers and

donors, one of their duties. This manual was also intended to codify best practices so that the office would operate smoothly.

In order to create this manual, I first sat down with The Board and the Executive Director to see what each party wanted in the final product. Both agreed that there had been some confusion over the role of the board and executive director and that that confusion had led to unnecessary conflict. To fix this, I went back and read the original bylaws and presented them in a more practical, plain English way so that each party was clear on their goals.

Next, the board wanted a bit of the history of Bethesda Green included. In order to do this, I compiled the highlights of Bethesda Greens' history including major events and the quarterly financial statement. All of this information had been stored in Bethesda Green's drop box account but it was not organized in a usable way. I first organized the drop box to be user friendly so that any of the board members could get further information if they wished and then took the major events and made them part of the manual. This allowed board members to better understand the organization for which they had fiduciary and governance responsibility and enabled them to give potential donors a bit of Bethesda Green history.

Finally, I created a "press kit" for the end of the binder that could be easily removed and given to anyone who wanted information on Bethesda Green. This folder contained the most recent Bethesda Green calendar including networking events and educational seminars. It also included a donation form with information on where the donations went, a little history on Bethesda Green and a brief plan of what to expect in the future for Bethesda Green.

This manual is now being used; everyone has been asked to take notes on what they think worked and what they think needs improvements. I intend to go back to the Bethesda Green office during winter break and implement the suggestions, leaving Bethesda Green with an

exceptionally functional board manual. Hopefully this way the sometimes contentious and confused executive director/ board relationship can be more easily managed and all can more easily fulfill their duties.

Creating Green Themed Children's Activities

One of the main premises which Bethesda green was founded under was the idea of educating the public on green issues and providing them with ways they can make their lives more environmentally friendly. This is mainly done in Bethesda Greens educational center, which is open daily 9am to 4pm. It is usually staffed by a volunteer and contains information on many environmental topics ranging from E waste to where you can buy organic food. Over 1000 people use this resource each year. However, the educational center was not very child friendly, targeted to an adult audience. My job was to create an area where children could understand the posters (as well as see them without being lifted by a parent) and create activities that the children could do by themselves so that they could be entertained while their parents obtained information.

The poster contains information encouraging children to do things like turning off lights and the faucet so they don't waste resources and asks them to talk to their parents about things like renewable energy and recycling. The activities (attached) are coloring pages that contain lessons such as what appliances waste energy, renewable sources of energy and what items can be recycled. Through these, young children will be able to learn a little more about being environmentally friendly while still having fun.

These activities will also be taken with the Bethesda Green representative to places such as street fairs and farmers markets so that children can also be included into these events. There is hope that one day Bethesda Green will be able to go into classrooms or have school groups

come to them. This is a step in the right direction as they are beginning to come up with educational material that is directed at children. Hopefully, Bethesda Green will one day be able to educate people in school and that these activities will enable adults to get information on the environment unhampered by their young children while the children learn something also.

Relation to Classes

Though it is difficult to pick one course that my internship related to, I can say that any class as I ever did a presentation in, and all my writing classes proved helpful over the course of my internship. Though the "hard science" I learned in General Chemistry and Ecology provide me with a rounded knowledge of the environment and let me put a few fun facts into the educational center, my social science classes prepared me more then anything else. I never once found myself having to come up with an equation, but their were multiple times I found myself sitting on goggle scholar looking up information to present at a meeting. Yet, most often found myself writing, weather it be brief emails or contracts or poster, I was always writing something. Having the writing knowledge from CLL 190 and 290 as well as 410 proved very helpful.

The one thing I wish my classes had better prepared me for was writing official contract like documents. Though the format and the terminology were easy to pick up, it was something that I had not been exposed to in any of my ESF classes and would have been helpful to know prior to my internship.

Lessons Learned

Working for Bethesda Green is an experience I will never forget. No day was the same and as much as I hate to admit it, college is much less stressful then an actual job. If I had to sum it up into lessons learned, there would be eight.

1. Be prepared to be involved in anything and everything. In a small company there are some days you find yourself picking up gifts from sponsors, then getting a call to go talk to the CEO of a major corporation only to get back to the office to find you are needed to help someone make a TV commercial. By the time that's all done and you sit down to accomplish the work you had planned to do that day something has changed and you need to rethink your whole concept. And to do that you need to call person X and get their approval only after getting person Y's approval. There is never a day that will go perfectly according to plan—but that's half the fun. As long as you just go with it and make sure you have done enough background research before accepting an internship, then being involved in everything means you get a very well rounded view of the non profit world.

2. Write down people names right after you meet them. In a job where I was doing lots of networking I was often introduced to people rather quickly at meetings. The introductions were often short and sweet only exchanging names and the companies we represented. However, I would find myself week or months later realizing they would be a good vendor at a program like solar Bethesda or they would be a good speaker at one of our lecture series. Writing down people's names, emails and where we met so that I could contact them later really paid off. People are impressed when you remember things like that and those personal relationships that we now had made them much more willing to help Bethesda Green.

3. Carry a pen and paper everywhere. Computers die in meetings and when your sitting a big conference table you can not exactly shuffle everyone so you are near an outlet. And on top of that, a lot of business people don't like bringing their laptops to meetings because they think people hide behind the screens. Overall, plain old boring pen and legal pad wins the battle in a meeting. However, I say carry a pan and paper everywhere because as an intern I was always

getting instructions about what needed to be done or another project I could work on. Vary rarely did these come while I was sitting at my desk. It was often standing in someone's office where it would be rude to pull out your phone to add it there or simply walking down the hall. If I did not have a pen and paper, I would probably always be a step behind

4. It's all about reaching out. In today's age of facebook and linked-in and other social networking sites, it seems that everyone you know knows someone else you know. In college these are fun coincidences. In business it's networking and networking is key. Most of the vendors and sponsors I found for Solar Bethesda were discovered through a friend knowing a friend who would be a good candidate or someone contacting us because we emailed someone and that email was forwarded. In the non-profit world, contacting these, "intermediaries" is referred to as reaching out. And everyone reaches out. The relationships you have with people are exceptionally valuable. Make sure you are always polite and friendly. You never know who may know a person who may know a person who may be perfect for your business. In my case I got this internship because of a recommendation from a person I knew who was in the same leadership course as the CEO Bethesda Green However, my favorite "reaching out" moment came when after I returned to school, I was able to connect a person I met during one of the educational seminars to an environmentally friendly filmmaker who was one of the Bethesda Green incubator companies. Even in a low level, who you know can help a lot.

5. Work happens before and after work. In college you go to lectures and are assigned homework to be completed at home. In the work world, you are given tasks. There is no "do this here and then take this home". There is "get this task done by tomorrow." If you can't get it done in the "workday" you stay late or come in early. You do it and don't complain. If you do mediocre work, you don't get a bad grade, you lose your job. And it's not like finals in college

where if you get three in one day you can ask to have one moved. If you have three things to do, you get three things done. Your boss will call you before your alarm goes off and you're expected to know exactly what is going on. Things will change at 8pm and you're expected to get them into final reports. Work will follow you home.

6. There is a thing as a stupid question. Sometimes it is good to Google before you ask.

Sitting down in one of our weekly meetings with the full staff, one of my fellow interns asked what SolarHoney, one of our vendors for Solar Bethesda, did as a business. It was our job to have all the vendors finalized so asking what one of the vendors did looked quite unprofessional. One quick Google search would have told him they do home energy audits and lease solar panels. I am not saying that questions are bad, everyone realizes you are an intern and are extremely willing to pass on their knowledge, but there is a difference between gaining knowledge from someone's experience and being unprepared.

7. Relationships between employees can be complicated. In the non profit world, there is not a more complicated or important relationship than that between executive director and the board. Only by working together to fulfill the mission will all parties be successful, and it is easy for ill-defined roles to cause confusion, which then can cause conflict. Non-profit organizations have very tricky internal politics, which must be treated with care. The tension is ingrained into the design of a non-profit organization. You must be respectful of that divide and work within it. If you do not tread lightly you can get yourself involved in office politics you have no need to be involved with. Push back.

8. It's important to have fun. If you take a break to actually enjoy what you are doing, work does not seem like work, especially when you're doing something you love. Some of my favorite memories of my internship were goofing off with the executive director at a routine

press conference where he spoke. We were in no way unprofessional yet we managed to turn what would have been a routine morning into something entertaining. It is because of things like this that have allowed me to establish a good relationship with the staff, good enough to have them ask me back this winter.